Council Briefing Topic: Transition to a Mostly Electronic FDLP Collection

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Overview

Libraries are increasingly relying on information available from the Internet. Publications available on the Web are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Users are able to access this information from their home, office, or wherever there is an Internet connection. Many depository libraries are seeing the value in focusing their collection efforts on Web resources, thus freeing resources for user services. Accordingly, several recent depository library designations have included mostly electronic depository libraries for the first time in the history of the Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP). Recent inquiries from depository library coordinators and other librarians interested in participating in the FDLP raised some questions and issues that relate to a mostly electronic FDLP collection.

A mostly electronic Federal Depository Library collection is a collection of Federal publications that are primarily available in an online format, but may also include tangible electronic publications. For example, some tangible publications continue to be sent to the Federal Depository Libraries (FDL) because of the importance of the content or visibility of the publication.

Depository responsibilities

For more than 150 years, depository libraries have supported the public's right to access Federal government information by collecting, organizing and preserving it, and providing assistance to users. Congress established the FDLP to help fulfill its responsibility to inform the public on the policies and programs of the Federal government. All depositories share in this responsibility. Providing no-fee public access to Federal Government information is the guiding principle for which the program was established.

The legal responsibilities of Federal depository libraries fall into the broad categories of access, maintenance, and service. For example:

- Providing free public access to Federal Government information products regardless of format.
- Providing the proper maintenance of the Federal depository materials entrusted to the individual depository's care.
- Providing service to meet the government information needs of the local community and surrounding area.

Libraries wishing to transition to a mostly electronic collection must do so with the understanding that the principles and responsibilities identified above will remain in place in the mostly electronic environment. With careful review of the needs of the library's primary clientele, as well as the needs of the general public, a library may make the decision to move to a mostly electronic depository collection. Also, providing free access to the resources of the depository collection, including electronic resources, remains a fundamental responsibility of all Federal depository libraries. Free access as defined by GPO means that any member of the general public can use government information products in all media at the library without impediment.

The scope of a mostly electronic collection has not changed from the requirement for all depository libraries; it should include material to meet the needs of the primary patrons of the library and the general public. To meet these needs, the library may select material in appropriate format, relying on GPO services for electronic publications, such as the Catalog of U.S. Government Publications, Federated search capabilities, and the FDLP Electronic Collection (EC). The library may also utilize services and products of commercially acquired resources to meet these needs as appropriate for their collection and their users.

Key Assumptions:

While this paper focuses on libraries transitioning to a mostly electronic Federal depository collection, the following assumptions apply to all libraries participating in the FDLP.

1. A mostly electronic Federal depository library collection will consist of electronic information products and services. There will continue to be some tangible products distributed to the libraries because of the importance of the material and/or visibility of the publication.
2. General administration of the electronic depository collection will be the responsibility of the Federal depository coordinator and the Library Director.
3. Collection development decisions for the electronic Federal depository library will be developed in accordance with the library's overall collection development policy and the FDLP requirement to select materials to meet the Federal information needs of the general public.
4. The library will develop public service guidelines for access to electronic products to ensure public access to the Federal resources.
5. A mostly electronic Federal depository library will provide sufficient public access computer work stations and study areas for users to access Federal publications.
6. Both onsite and offsite users will utilize the resources in a mostly electronic depository collection.
7. Staff in a mostly electronic depository collection will provide access to electronic depository resources through the most effective methods for the library's collections. For example, linking to online resources via the library's web pages, online catalog, pathfinders as appropriate.
8. FDLs will continue to provide in-house assistance and access to Federal information resources for the general public even when most of these resources are available from a public website.

9. Reference assistance in a mostly electronic collection will include reference assistance to all Federal resources, tangible and online resources, on a comparable level for reference assistance provided for commercially acquired resources.

10. Decisions about developing a mostly electronic collection will not be made in a vacuum, but rather will be part of an overall review of depository collections in the Congressional District or local service area.

11. The general public must be allowed no-fee public Internet access to depository resources. If there is a security arrangement or filter in place, the library must provide an alternative mechanism to access Federal in-scope online resources for all groups of library users.

12. Libraries must ensure that their security and access policies, as well as those of the library's parent institution, do not hinder public access to depository materials.

13. Libraries must provide the ability to download, copy, and print Federal Government resources. If fees are assessed for these services, they must not exceed library charges for non-depository materials.

14. Although mostly electronic depositories focus on 24/7 access to available electronic resources, access to materials in other formats should be made available during business hours or via interlibrary loan services. Libraries that offer night and weekend service hours to their primary user groups must offer comparable service hours to depository users of electronic resources.

15. Staffing levels at depository libraries will change as a result of the transition to a mostly electronic depository library. Initial staffing levels may actually increase because of the need to do collection analysis, continuing collection maintenance, identification of additional electronic titles for inclusion in the library's online catalog, and the performance of dual processes until most new materials are electronic.

16. Staff skill sets will also change as the focus shifts from unpacking and processing shipments to identification and bibliographic control for online resources. Staff must also be prepared to share information about electronic products and services and be able to teach/assist patrons and other library staff in utilizing these resources.

17. As a minimum, all Federal Depository Libraries should have a Web page that explains the library's collection and areas of emphasis. It should include the FDLP logo, contact information for appropriate staff, and information about hours and services. For mostly electronic FDLs, this Web page becomes even more important as it is often the public face of the depository collection.

New Information:

There are 1266 libraries in the Federal Depository Library Program as of March 1, 2006. Of these, 15 libraries are working towards becoming, or have entered the program expecting to be, a mostly electronic depository library. Thus far in FY 2006, 5 tangible information products of high public interest have been sent to all libraries, including mostly electronic depository libraries. In FY 2005, 71% of all new FDLP publications were made available only online and an additional 21% were available online as well as in one or more tangible formats. 8% of the publications were distributed only in a tangible format.

Questions:

1. There has not been a requirement in the FDLP that any Federal depository library "retain" online publications in the same manner they are required to retain tangible publications. If a library selects an item number for an electronic only title and the library catalogs the title for inclusion in the library's online catalog, does the library need to retain the cataloging record for that title in the library's online catalog for at least 5 years if there is a subsequent decision that the title no longer fits the library's collection profile?

2. Tangible materials received on deposit by libraries remain the property of the U.S. Government according to Title 44 and libraries become the custodians of these resources. What does this mean in an electronic environment when libraries provide access to depository resources? What would it mean if GPO were to disseminate electronic files of online publications to depository libraries?

3. In a mostly electronic collection, must online publications be included in the library's public access catalog, or may the library use other ways to offer access to online depository resources, such as federated searching, reference assistance, or links to resources from detailed web pages?

4. Anonymous access is no longer mandatory now that libraries may require patrons to show identification, and patrons may be thus required to provide identification before accessing a public access computer workstation. Is mediated searching by public services staff an acceptable alternative if an institution does not wish to allow the use of public access workstations to its non-primary clientele?

5. If the library prints out a copy of an online only publication and places it on a shelf in the physical depository collection, does the five year retention requirement apply before the document can be weeded from the collection? Do the FDLP Guidelines on Substituting Electronic for Tangible Versions of Depository Publications apply?

6. If a library specializes in certain subject areas which are well-reflected in their collection development policy and the overall collection, is the library required to provide access to electronic resources that are outside that specialization? This does not assume that reference assistance will be made available for resources outside of the library's primary areas of focus, only that libraries must provide Web access. For example, a patron wishes to access agriculture information from a library that specializes in health services.

7. With most publications in an electronic depository collection available only online via the Internet, may the library set a per session or daily time limit for library users of Internet accessible workstations? For example, is one hour a day an acceptable time limitation for a depository library that is mostly electronic? What other arrangements can be made to accommodate public users of FDLP material?

8. Must libraries select item numbers representing online publications when they may access and provide bibliographic control over them without selecting them? If not, how will GPO and others in the community know the scope of the collection and be able to provide appropriate referrals?

9. Must a library provide access to non-depository online resources, such as Federal agency home pages, which are not distinctly included as part of the FDLP Electronic Collection?